

AN EXPLORATION OF VULNERABILITY THROUGH CREATIVE PROCESS
AND PERFORMANCE

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between vulnerable experiences and dance. As artists, why is it important for us to value our vulnerabilities? Through examining or facing our weakness, our true strengths are revealed. In my 3- year MFA studies, I have found that allowing myself to be vulnerable is important in my learning process, my creative process, and my performance. By embracing my own vulnerabilities, I have gained a greater understanding of who I am as an artist and as a person. Finally, through my exploration of my thesis process, I believe that vulnerability is one of the universal languages in art and in dance.

This thesis is dedicated to my loving family

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Out of your vulnerabilities will come your strength.

Sigmund Freud

A Moment of Transformation

A female dancer wears a red floral print dress. She holds a wired microphone as she walks slowly across the stage. A sultry voice fills the air. At first, I thought she was singing, but she is not. The music provides the vocal track, but she is only sighing deeply, over and over again, into the microphone. There are about eight male dancers supporting her, from underneath, making it seem like she is floating above their supine bodies. Sometimes the male dancers treat her like a Venus Goddess by lifting her up in the air, and sometimes they spin her on the floor like she is a rag doll. I could not tell if she enjoyed passively participating in these activities, or if she was suffering. This was the first image that moved me in the beginning of *Masurca Fogo*.

Pina Bausch choreographed this piece in 1998, and Tanztheater Wuppertal presented *Masurca Fogo* in Taiwan 2007. After watching this piece, my opinion of dance performance and choreography was completely changed. In the past, I was afraid of being judged by others based on how many turns I could perform or how high I could lift

my leg in the air. In seeing Bausch's work, I realized that dancers do not have to be perfect robots, but they can express deep emotions and embody raw energy. The dancers do not have to have perfect hair, costumes, or make up on stage but can be seen as real people who get dirty, sweaty, and impassioned when they dance. Bausch's work propelled and encouraged me to be confident in the expression of my real emotions, in my performance and in my choreography. It was through *Masurca Fogo* that I was able to see the power of vulnerability. For me, the beginning of *Masurca Fogo* provided the information that male dancers have manipulated this female dancer, and she reveals vulnerability in her passive surrender to their ambiguous embraces. Though she cannot speak, it seems that she has a lot to say in this section of the piece. Through her actions, she tells me that she is a victim of the people in her life who use her, and she cannot respond to them or break away from them. However, it is not so simple. The female dancer could be enjoying herself as well, and refusing to take a more active role in her own life. These complexities of the human existence are portrayed, without artifice, in order to help us witness the vulnerable truths inherent in dependent relationships. In *Masurca Fogo*, I found something greater than physical virtuosity, and that is being able to reveal vulnerability in dance. I also began to realize that my early dance training experiences had taught me that dancing *correctly* was more important than dancing *honestly*.

When I came to the Dance Department at the University of Utah from Taiwan, my experience had been more in the realm of virtuosity and larger-than-life physical prowess. I have made a significant change in my aesthetic values. My thesis has led me into notable areas of vulnerability in terms of what I had known to be true in the past and

what I am now discovering and valuing in a profound way. Understanding and experiencing vulnerability has had a great impact on me as an artist and a person. I have a passion for dance but I often feel afraid to face the inevitable vulnerabilities inherent in an artist's life. I have often wondered what I can contribute to the larger dance community, and whether I will be able to persevere in this difficult field. I feel that my personal history has made me what I am today and there are things in my past that have caused me to investigate these questions and insecurities. In this document, I will address the research on vulnerability in psychology and in performance as well as the result of my personal musings on vulnerability and the effect it has on my artistic work.

In this thesis research, I have chosen to discuss three different perspectives on vulnerability in dance: the perspective of a choreographer, a performer, and an audience member. In order to determine whether the vulnerability in a dance performance is having an affect, I look for instances of empathy between the performer and the audience. How can a performance represent an honest slice of humanity, and therefore encourage the audience members to ponder their own lives in an honest way? For example, how did Pina Bausch do this, and can her ideas about the choreographic process help me to understand my own process? How can a choreographer transform human vulnerabilities into dance choreography? How can a dancer use his/her own vulnerability in the performance context? As an audience member, how do I sense and describe the qualities of vulnerable dance performance? By including research on the psychological studies of vulnerability from the works of Joern Birkmann, Nancy Jerker, and Veronica Torres, among others, I hope to address my research inquires. Finally, why is it important for the dance world to understand vulnerability in performance and the choreographic process?

By asking and investigating these questions, this thesis also aims to examine how vulnerability itself might provide artistic inspiration, as well as provide an avenue for artistic and personal development. Can vulnerability become an inspiration for, as well as a product of, the work of an artistic life?

In Chapter 2, I will discuss some of the psychological theories about vulnerability; for example, Wanis (2008) claims, “Most of us fear taking off our mask or masks and revealing our true selves. Many of us hold back out of fear of rejection, criticism or condemnation” (n.p.). There are many people in the world who have dealt with these fears. It is difficult to place our true selves in front of people, not knowing if our innermost thoughts will be rejected, hated, or ridiculed. However, there are many examples of artists overcoming the fear, insecurity and uncertainty, and presenting their vulnerable selves to the world through their works. I would place myself among these courageous artists and I am not only in their debt, but they have been and remain examples for me of continued growth.

In the latter part of the chapter, I will look at Bausch’s choreographic work, writings about her creative process, and reviewers’ comments on her work. I will discuss how she has approached vulnerability in art. It is true that dance has often been used for entertainment value, and to showcase virtuosity and larger-than-life talent. In modern dance, some choreographers have developed other interests, values, and priorities but I am curious how Bausch led her dancers into uncharted territories because I have also made a shift as an artist, a performer and choreographer into my own uncharted territories.

As evident for a choreographer, there are many methods for exploring vulnerability. When I see a performance that moves me, I feel that the dancers have reached some depth within themselves in order to reach that same deepness within me as an audience member. I believe that empathy takes place when that depth is revealed by choreography. There are a few experiences in my life that have caused me to ponder these ideas. In Chapter 3, I will discuss my early dance training in Taiwan, and then I will discuss my own artistic work “*La Vie*,” which illustrates the transformation I have made during 3 years of study. Next, I will discuss my role in the performance of the piece *Clear, White, Nonsense*, which was choreographed by Katherine Pottratz in 2011. In this piece, I was required to improvise verbally, using English words, while developing the major narrative for the piece. This was an intimidating process for me as a non-native English speaker. I was challenged to go into this very vulnerable place and fully commit to what I had to generate as a performer.

In my conclusion, I will reflect on vulnerability in my choreographic and performance experiences. I believe that vulnerability provides an avenue for artistic and personal development in our lives. This has been a transformative research project for me, and I am glad to share my findings with a broader dance community. I will also project into my future and include some thoughts about how this thesis project will impact my own artistic work and my life as I move forward.

CHAPTER 2

VULNERABILITY

Showing vulnerability is a source of power.

Sharon Ellison

Psychological Theories Related to Vulnerability

Definitions of the term “vulnerable” can be found in multiple fields of study, including psychology, medical science, and social science. According to Birkmann (2006), “the current literature [of social science] encompasses more than 25 different definitions, concepts and methods to systematize vulnerability” (p.11). In this chapter I will not analyze each definition that can be found in every field of study. However, I will discuss several meanings of vulnerability that have relevance to my personal research. I will then relate these theories of vulnerability to my own dance-based perspective.

Although the word “vulnerable” is common in the English language, it can refer to many things. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “vulnerable” comes from the Latin term *vulnerabilis*, meaning “wounding,” and from the word “ability,” taken in the more passive sense of being able to receive injury (compact Edition 1971, p. 329). When we are confronting a situation in which we may be injured, we feel fear, insecurity or uncertainty. These emotions are unpleasant, so we conceal our fears and put on masks of bravery. The emotions that we hide may be shameful to us, and become a part of us

that we do not want other people to know about. We may become fearful or insecure about these hidden emotions, and they become more painful. As a result, the more we hide, the more we fear that our pain will be discovered and judged by others. Our capacity to be wounded by others grows with our pain, and thus we are vulnerable to the outside world.

Since I moved to this country for graduate school, my Taiwanese family and friends have asked me when I plan to return to Taiwan to visit. My answer has always been the same: Maybe I will go back next year. This was my way of avoiding the true answer, which is that I will not go back to Taiwan until I have begun a successful career in dance. Although I am homesick sometimes, I feel that I need to bring honor to my studies before I can return to my family and friends. I am fearful and unsure of what success the future will hold, but I do not want to admit this to my friends. Thus, every time I have to deal with this question, I feel uncertain and insecure. I do not want to reveal my fears, but each time I tell that lie, I feel more pain.

According to Veronica Torres, our insecurity is not the only component of vulnerability. In a situation like I have described above, I feel the weakness that comes from being in an insecure position. However, in order to cross over into the territory of vulnerability, I need to admit my weakness, and reveal my insecurities. As human beings, we may be weak or imperfect in many ways, but it is only if we are brave enough to claim our truths that we can be considered vulnerable. In Torres' (2011) research, she eloquently describes the differences between weakness and vulnerability:

Weakness is when you're in a position where you don't feel secure, you don't feel strong, you don't have certainty, you don't feel completely safe, and you try to hide it or you lie about it. Vulnerability is when you're in the exact same position and you tell your truth about it. When you're in a position of vulnerability it's

actually the ultimate strength because there's nothing hidden, you're not pretending, there's nothing fake, there is no way to topple you. (n.p.)

This definition speaks to my own perspective of vulnerability in the dance world. A performer may not tell a verbal story that admits a weakness on stage, but the subject of a dance piece may communicate vulnerabilities without the help of verbal language. Gesture, mood, abstract narrative, and character relationships may combine to tell a story that exposes a difficult truth. The performative qualities that make this possible are difficult to define, but a heartfelt performance can reach us, even if we cannot describe the reason. Climenhaga (2009) believes that “Each dancer’s personality shines through in performance, more than simply in giving the movement a particular energy, but in the very makeup of the pieces themselves, and it is that personal material that brings out the underlying feelings of the piece” (p.43).

Through vulnerability we can begin to understand who we are. Exposing our hidden truths may help us to appreciate our weaknesses and illuminate our fears. Our insecurities and uncertainties become more tangible, and we become stronger as we connect with others who share our pain. According to Sharon Ellison (n.d.), we fear to reveal our vulnerabilities, because, “from an early age, we're conditioned to believe that to expose our fears, weaknesses and negative feelings at a time of confrontation is to invite trouble” (n.p.). The truth is just the opposite. “The alchemy between vulnerability and honesty is the chemical reaction that can transform our communication” (n.p.). Vulnerability can become a tool to identify our weaknesses, expose our fears, and communicate honestly with those around us. In order to contribute to the art community and to the world, and to humanity in a global sense, we must be honest with ourselves, because we can only initiate change with ourselves.

Many people in the world share similar fears and insecurities, and art is one avenue for expressing these commonalities. Vulnerability can allow us to bond with our communities, as well as to our audience members. Even though vulnerability is difficult to define, I believe it is a crucial element in dance. For example, I recently performed in Katharine Pottratz's piece, *Clear, White, Nonsense*. As I will discuss later, in this piece I was required to improvise English text. As a non-native English speaker, to do this I had to expose my weakness and show my vulnerability on stage. However, I was surprised in that my performance inspired unexpected compliments and praise from the audience. Due to this experience, I have come to understand that audiences may be interested in or feel moved by a dancer that reveals imperfections, unpredictability, and unexpected truths on stage. As these vulnerabilities are revealed, audience members may be moved to realize that the art that is happening on stage reflects the life that is lived off stage. Rather than presenting an unattainable perfection, the performers will empathize with the reality of imperfection. Empathy can bring people together. Although we each have a unique face, we have many of the same joys and fears. Perhaps, vulnerability is one of the most human ways of communicating.

Pina Bausch and Vulnerability

Dance is something other than technique. We forget where the movements come from. They are born from life. When you create a new work, the point of departure must be contemporary life -- not existing forms of dance.

Pina Bausch

There are some choreographers who value vulnerability in their artwork in order to create connection between their artwork and the minds and hearts of the audience.

Some choreographers provide images, metaphors or text in their dances to help the message (or meaning) to come across. By studying different modern dance choreographers' perspectives from the past, I begin to understand how vulnerability can influence the choreographic process. In particular, I have researched Pina Bausch's artistic philosophy, because her work has had considerable influence on my life and my creative work.

Pina Bausch (1940-2009) is one of the most influential choreographers of the 20th century. Dance historian Dover (2005) describes Bausch's work in this way: "In their cinematic potency, these scenes are all the more vivid because they unfold in real space and time. Through them, Bausch sets a tone based on human vulnerability that gives her work such resonance" (p.7). Bausch's artistic philosophy has influenced me since the first time I saw her live work entitled *Masurca Fogo*.^{*} When I saw this piece, I felt a swell of emotion. In some scenes, I was able to sense the dancers' happiness or sadness. In addition, I was able to reflect on my own vulnerable life experiences. I was inspired by the action of this piece and find Bausch's work and her philosophy to be an ongoing impetus for my creative process. Bausch said: "I am not so interested in how they move as in what moves them" (Climenhaga, 2009, p.1). This quotation explains that she is concerned more about where the movement comes from, what makes the dancers move,

^{*} Tanztheater Wuppertal presented Pina Bausch's masterpiece "*Masurca Fogo (1998)*" in Taiwan in 2007. The word "*Masurca Fogo*" means Mazurka of Fire. This piece originally is a coproduction with Lisbon World Exposition and Goethe-Institut Lissabon in 1998. Guse (2007) introduced that "Each year the company produces a new work, frequently commissioned by public institutions for special occasions, and it continues to tour the world. With her creative selection of music, often drawing on world music, her signature choreography, and her inventive staging, Bausch has an undiminished power to impress, entertain, puzzle, provoke, and annoy" (p.428). The subject matter of "*Masurca Fogo*" is about the exploration of human relationships, human individualities, the tension between exhilaration and fear, and the relationships between harmony and discord.

and how she can exhibit their motivations and emotions in her pieces. Even though Bausch used highly technically trained, accomplished dancers in her work, the piece is not about the number of turns or tricks the dancers can do, but it is about the way the dancers use their bodies to convey meaning through movement. For instance, in one of Bausch's well-known pieces, *Cafe Müller*, there is a solo in which a female dancer reveals her physical vulnerability on stage. She wears a long skirt and closes her eyes for almost the entire dance section. There are chairs in her way, but she cannot see where they are. A male dancer helps her by moving the chairs out of her path. She unfolds her arm and stretches her palms in front of her, and then stumbles backwards like an awkward child. The way she leans against a wall suggests that she is looking for a harbor or refuge. She looks helpless and hopeless until she falls into a chair, and then she seems to realize that no one can protect her in this unfamiliar, invisible environment. She rebounds and runs, unseeing, into the space. There are other dancers who interact bravely with the environment as well. Pina Bausch herself performs a solo in this piece, in which she opens her sternum and exposes her torso and neck to the audience again and again. She seems to know that she is vulnerable in this position, and it pains her to continue to open herself in this way, but she must continue.

This section of the piece illustrates a very important point about the meaning and expression of vulnerability in a dance performance. The bravery with which these two dancers expose themselves, in spite of the pain or danger that they are experiencing, symbolizes the utmost of vulnerability. Simply suffering, or portraying negative emotions in a dance piece, does not qualify as vulnerable performance. These two dancers are experiencing pain, but instead of shrinking from it, instead of shying away from it, they

run out to meet it, head on. They use symbolic gestures, opening their arms wide, as if to admit that they are helpless. They reach out to the audience, to other dancers, to unseen forces, for help. In this piece, they are doing what I wish to do in my life, and in my dances. They seem to have an unending well of courage in the face of the suffering and confusion of life. Even in their pain, they seem to have an unending capacity for hope, for connection, and for love. The ever-present repetition in Bausch's dances seems to portray the futility of human struggle, but for me, the dancers repeat their struggles because of the possibility of redemption.

The Questioning Methodology

Bausch has explored a unique methodology in her creative process to achieve this effect. Bausch states, "I wanted to express what I couldn't express with words at all. Something I have to say urgently, but not verbally. These are feelings or questions, I never have an answer..." (Climenhaga, 2009, p.40). Bausch has a habit of questioning her dancers about their most uncomfortable, most frightening, most abusive, or most vulnerable experiences. Climenhaga (2009) mentions that when Bausch initiates the questioning methodology in her rehearsal, "the questions begin to open up experience, and the work in rehearsals becomes the slow uncovering...of the idea or feeling in question" (p.52). Through the disclosure and articulation of their answers, Pina Bausch and her dancers devise choreography that is based on the abstract reenactment of these momentous experiences. Bausch's dancers often admit that such emotional availability is difficult to maintain in rehearsal day after day, as Bausch asks them to expose themselves again and again. In a 2007 interview for the Kyoto Prize, she admits, "I do it again and

again, to maintain this approach in my daily work. This is a difficult and sometimes terrifying process” (n.p.).

Although it is difficult to maintain such emotional availability, I believe the result is that the movement is not merely about moving the body. It creates an inseparable relationship between the movement and the performer. This unique relationship makes those movements belong only to the dancer. As an audience member, I was moved by the individual intentions and motivations from the dancers in Bausch’s work.

Climenhaga (2009) asserts that “Bausch forces us to question life and our placement in it, not by providing an alternative solution, but by providing a ground for exploration and a sense of urgency of the problems she attacks” (p.65). Through the questions, she attempts to help her dancers to introspect and become aware of their life experiences and their hidden selves. Climenhaga (2009) also suggests that: “the questions reveal the way in which the performers are contained through their experience, how they experience individual moments of connection” (p.52). Bausch does not expect her dancers to answer the questions she provides. She values the process of exploring the range of possible answers, so that the dancers can communicate more deeply with themselves and with her. “Bausch gives her dancers time to explore the (self-) questioning initiated by her, time to arrive at answers of their own” (Climenhaga, 2009, p.54). According to those perspectives, it proves Bausch’s belief that “my pieces grow from the inside out” (Tashiro, 1999). She knows that initiating the question about the dancer’s personal experience helps the dancers to know what she is searching for. However, she explains that it like an “adventure, but with no map...All I know is that I needs lots of confidence. And that I must not get impatient” (Inamori Foundation

Channel, 2007). Although some dancers might respond spontaneously, some may contemplate longer. Bausch uses their stories, images and gestures to integrate into her choreography, but there is no magic formula for how to accomplish this task. According to Poderit (2007), she notes that in Tanztheater Wuppertal “each piece is the result of the emerging process of interactions between dancers and the choreographer in which each member brings his or her experience to the stage” (p.224). In this way, the piece is made up by their subjective expressions of their reality, which the dancers and Bausch bring together to create the performance from the inside out.

How have fear and insecurity affected Bausch in her choreography? Perhaps life experiences have affected how she choreographed, developed, and expanded her ideas in “*Masurca Fogo*.” I discovered that although there is often violence in the relationships in Bausch’s work, she has said that she is afraid to see violence in real life. Brown (2012) interviewed Bausch about her use of violence in “*Masurca Fogo*,” and Bausch explained:

Some of these things appear in the pieces because I am afraid of violence. . . If somebody is screaming loud, I find it very uncomfortable" - she banged her heart - "I can't stay (and watch)." Men and women don't only fight, of course. But, for some people, fighting is exciting; life would be boring without it. There are so many ways of relating to each other. (1.19.2002)

According to Bausch’s explanation, she found that she was uncomfortable when witnessing the violence between two people. However, she puts it in her choreography because it is one of the ways that people relate to each other. What I have discovered in Bausch’s work to be most powerful is her ability to explore one’s fears in dance choreography, and turn that into artistic expression. In Bausch’s work, we are able to sense the dancers’ fears, loneliness, or exhilaration through their movement. I believe that although these truths are sometimes ugly or violent, it is healing to witness dark things

brought to light, because we discover that our struggles are similar to the struggles of others. Our deep human experiences become universal. Stein (2010) remarks: “It is my experience, as both patient and practitioner, that working through the body to access the unconscious is one of the most empowering venues for self generative healing” (p.156). Although we are all individuals, the human condition is our commonality. Through her willingness to share vulnerable truths with her audience, I believe that Bausch has enabled all of us to feel connected to ourselves and to the greater world.

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

Real art can never escape from life....The world of illusion which the audience expects from the artist is, in fact, the world of their real selves, the image of their own world, the translation of their hopes and fears, their joys and sufferings into the magic of the stage.

Charles Weidman

Dance Training

When I was 13, I decided to become a professional dancer. At that time I came to believe that dance was my foremost interest and passion; it continues to allow me to discover things about myself that I never would have guessed. When I was in Taiwan, the way that I thought about myself as a dancer was very different from how I view myself in this art form today.

There was considerable discipline in my dance training experience when I was young. In my studio, we focused on competition dance, which promoted a high level of technique and virtuosity. In terms of dance movement, I always learned that there was one right way to do things and many wrongs. If I danced exactly the same as my teacher, matching her shape, angle, and direction, then, my teacher would tell me that I was doing it right. However, if I moved my body in a different way than the others, then, I was told I was wrong. At that time, to dance with the right shape, angle and direction was what I

valued in dance. I thought that dance was about mimicry of the teacher. Therefore, my aesthetic was based on the fact that there was a certain canon of dance movements, and they should always be performed precisely and identically. To my shame, I was always the person who danced differently, and the teacher always denounced me loudly, which embarrassed me and made me afraid of expressing myself and of making mistakes.

I remember a rehearsal for a group piece that would be performed in an upcoming dance performance. My angle was not the same as my classmates. My teacher yelled at me: “Shih-Ya, are you blind? Can you see in the mirror that your angle is different than other people?” At that moment, I felt ashamed, embarrassed and vulnerable; I could not stop myself from crying in the rehearsal. I do not understand why the teacher had to be cruel to correct me by denouncing me so loudly in front of my classmates. The consequences of this training could make any student become the type who only dances well in front of the teacher, relying on negative reinforcement as their only motivation for dancing. Additionally, this student might lack self-confidence and struggle to create his/her own dance movement. Earley and Ang (2003) discuss the influences of positive and negative reinforcement in education. “In positive reinforcement, a teacher would consistently reward certain positive learning behavior thereby building up a student’s confidence. Negative reinforcement, by contrast, refers to the absence of such rewards for undesired behavior” (p.285).

I believe that a dancer can and should be both highly technically proficient but also confident enough to put something of themselves into the dance vocabulary and performance. I had a very strict teacher for part of my dance training in Taiwan, and she challenged me to master line, shape, direction, and the technical precision needed to

become a stage performer. This was an important part of my training, and I do not want to undervalue the work that I did or the challenges that my teacher asked of me.

However, my early training convinced me that my individual struggles and imperfections had no place on the concert stage. Since then, I have reconsidered that premise and now know that the opposite is true for me.

As I reflect on the choreography that I created in my younger years, I realize that I did not value the individuality of the dancers in my creative process. Instead, I asked the dancers to mimic movement that I would demonstrate for them. This process parallels the pattern of how I learned to dance when I was young. My choreography did not strongly move me during this time. I felt the work was like an empty water bottle, because I would use the kinds of structures that I learned in my training to create the form of a dance, but I did not know how to fill the form with meaning. I knew that I was missing something as a performer and a choreographer. When I choreographed, I thought I wanted the audience to identify with my idea and to sense my intention. However, I think that the way that I attempted to communicate my ideas was one-dimensional. For example, I wanted to make a piece about the mask that we all wear in society. My dancers performed the same canon of technical steps in this dance, but they performed wearing masks. I now recognize that this was a very literal and superficial treatment of a choreographic intent. At that time, I was not aware of or confident enough about my emotions to explore them more deeply and abstractly.

My reflections on my early dance training experiences and my contact with Pina Bausch awakened a desire for a more meaningful connection to my performance and choreographic endeavors. I realized that dance could be about honest relationships, even

when we are dealing with uncomfortable truths about ourselves or about society. I recognized that dance is neither about mimicking the same movement as a teacher, nor pretending to dance happily on stage if we are not happy. Even if the movement was originally choreographed on another dancer or in another time, we must find some way to connect with the initial emotion and intention. In order to communicate with the audience, we must find some aspect of ourselves in every dance that we dance.

Creative Process

All mature creativity...depends on our capacity to encourage the growth of that inner freedom.

Heinz-Kohut

Charles Weidman (1905-1975), one of the founding artists of American modern dance, mentioned “real art can never escape from life” (Peters, 2003, n.p.). My life experience has always been a prime resource for my choreography. In the past I used my lived experience as motivation to create movement that would transcend the ordinary. Through my current exploration of my lived experience in my thesis research, I aim to continue seeking out ways that my artwork might inspire and connect with universal human emotions.

La Vie is a vivid journey of self-exploration which was inspired by my own childhood memories and also my new found drive to pursue a more real and authentic, human choreographic pursuit. I grew up in Taiwan with a loving mother, but my father was absent in my life for 10 years. As I reflected on my childhood memories, I recognized that my father’s absence has impacted my life, my relationships with others, and my art. Due to this realization and its deep impact on me, I chose to create methods

that allowed my dancers to access their own histories, and vulnerable stories. By creating this piece, I was able to share my own fear of being vulnerable with my dancers, and then I explained to my thesis committee and to others why vulnerability was so important in my dance *La Vie*. The process has helped me to open myself and reorient who I was in the past, in order to transform who I am in the present, as a person and as an artist.

Choreographic Methodology

Through my thesis research and the transformative process as a graduate student in the United States, I noticed that I began to value interpersonal research. By asking questions of people, I started to learn about a different culture, and in contrast, my own unclaimed cultural knowledge. When I was a student in Taiwan, I did not feel that I was encouraged to ask questions in the classroom. My classmates might judge me as a disruptive student, whose intelligence is not sufficient to understand the content in the class. However, since diving into the American educational culture, I felt that asking questions or participating in the conversation in the classroom is normal and expected. I remember the first lecture class I had in the dance department, everyone in the classroom was full of enthusiasm to participate and join in the discussion. The discussion was, in fact, the point of the class, and it propelled the learning of every student. Consequently, I began to convince myself to join the conversation and be active in the learning process.

Following this change in my social habits, I began to ponder my choreographic methods from an academic perspective. Instead of demanding certain movements from a dancer, like an authoritative teacher, what if I encouraged the dancers to participate in the discussion of a dance rehearsal? Their own movements, and individual voices would be

valued. Perhaps their roles in the piece would feel more authentic to them, because I would value what they have to say in my piece. As a result, I applied the “questioning methodology” from Pina Bausch, and in my creative process I consistently urged the dancers to provide their own answers to various creative problems.

To initiate the creative process of my thesis piece, *La Vie*, I first asked myself: Could I be vulnerable in front of my dancers by sharing an honest story about a part of my life that is hard for me to discuss? I decided to share a story from my childhood that exposed the imperfections of my family, and our complicated relationships with each other. I clearly knew that before sharing, I would have to overcome my feeling of shame about dishonoring my family and embrace my own vulnerability, so that I would be able to tell my authentic story without wearing a mask in front of my dancers. To share my most intimate and personal stories regarding my father’s absence in my childhood is like being naked in front of people. However, at the same time, I would be building a bridge of trust with the dancers. Based on this trust, the dancers might be willing to open up and explore their own vulnerabilities within our rehearsal process. After my own sharing, I asked the dancers the same question that I asked myself: “Do you have an intimate story that you feel is hard to discuss, or to share with people?” The dancers shared their most intimate and vulnerable stories and experiences with me, such as their love experiences, the love with their family, or the love with others in their lives. We tend to hide these stories in order to look strong so that people will not judge us or be worried about us. The fact that so many of the dancers’ stories shared common themes like love and loss and the experience allowed us to connect as a group.

By using Bausch's questioning methodology to initiate my own thesis work led me and the dancers to clarify unknown territories in our lives, and to find new sources and intentions for movement generation. Although we may think that our problems only belong to us and that our ordinary struggles should be hidden from the audience's view, in my rehearsal process I led my dancers in making movement that was based on their real-life struggles, however irrelevant or unimportant they might have seemed. *La Vie* was derived from these very human vulnerabilities. I valued the connection that my dancers felt to the piece because their own embarrassments, shames, and losses were part of its creation.

First Section: Imaginary Landscapes

Art is about expressions of the human spirit, and such expressions are better communicated in images, symbols, and metaphors.

Denhardt & Denhardt

For me, choreographing a dance is like an exploration into the landscape of the imagination. My dancers and I seek to invite the audience to experience those inner worlds. We expose these worlds on stage through a variety of images, symbols and metaphors.

In the first section of *La Vie*, I set up a scene in which the dancers are walking in a pedestrian style while communicating with others through eye contact as well as fleeting physical contact. The dancers gradually increase the tempo of the walking and the interactions. They then perform solos that are meant to invite the audience to get to know the individual performers, as if they are being welcomed to the world on the stage.

In the beginning of the creative process, I asked my dancers to imagine that the studio floor was the landscape of their emotional lives. I asked the dancers to draw two different lines on a white piece of paper. Each line symbolized a different part of their lives. We then used those lines as spatial patterns and the dancers traversed the studio space as if they could travel their life's path. This use of imagery was instrumental to getting the dancers to a personal and authentic place of intention in their performance. Chodorow (1991) refers to Whitehouse's (2000) statement of the importance of the relationship between dance movement and imagery:

When the image is truly connected in certain people then the movement is authentic. There is no padding of movement just for the sake of moving. There is an ability to stand the inner tension until the next image moves them. They don't simply dance around. (p. 22)

As a choreographer, I use imagery to connect the audience to the inner world of my dance. In the creative process, I use imagery to connect to the dancer's imagination in order to spark movement exploration and communicate through a more abstract level of movement language. Denhardt and Denhardt (2006) mention that, in art, "communication occurs less through the use of ordinary words than through images, symbols and metaphors" (p.80). Through this deep imagistic investigation, the dancers are experiencing their lives in the moment, as they follow the steps that lead them through their memories of their lives. This exploration became a ritual behavior, a chance for meditation. Fernandes (2001) states, "Through fragmentation and repetition, the personal histories and the feelings they evoke are increasingly transformed and dissociated from the dancers' personality and re-shaped into an aesthetic form" (p.28). In my work, the repetition of the dancer's individual movement stories is an important part of the creative process. Although the stories are their own, the movement becomes

increasingly a part of the dance itself. With each repetition, it becomes less about *me* and more about *us*. Instead of a group of individuals, the dance becomes about a cohesive community.

Second Section: Baby Metaphor

There are two female dancers who wear nude colored leotards. One represents an abstract image of a baby, another represents a naïve child, searching for attention. She constantly demonstrates her need by reaching again and again towards another mature female dancer on stage. There is also a male dancer, who seems unwilling to care that he is present and needed in the child's life. In the end of this section, the two female dancers with nude colored leotards crawl towards each other and mirror each other's movement. This image represents the merging of these two facets of the same identity. The endless searching for attention comes to an end, as the naïve child realizes her helplessness in an adult world, as symbolized by the repetitive, unemotional rolling of the baby figure. This realization causes her to give up her task of finding attention, and move on with her life as a young adult. At this point in the dance, she puts on a dress, symbolizing her coming of age.

Even though the inspiration came from my childhood memories, I didn't want to limit the dancers' perspective by forcing them to do a dance about my life. My aim was to utilize my own personal experience as a springboard for the dancers' vulnerable life experiences. My choreographic approach in this section is structured by repetition, and exposes the dancers' feelings of love and loss.

For this section, I made some of the movement choices based on my relationship with my father and mother. I forced myself to remember unpleasant situations that occurred when I was a child, and then reflected on what those experiences feel like for me as an adult. Therefore, I made some movement in which I placed myself in a lower position and stretched my arm up into the air, because this movement speaks to my helpless feeling of reaching out for love from the adults in my life. Also, I had one male dancer constantly walk on and off stage, because this disappearing and reappearing matches my memories of my father. Then, I encouraged the dancers to think about people in their lives who took care of them or rejected them. The dancers interpreted and adjusted my movement based on their individual feelings of love and loss. I also wanted them to think of times in their lives when they were innocent, without the pain of love.

In terms of the short mirroring image in this section, in *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, the author Ragland-Sullivan (1986) refers to a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). Lacan claims, “the mirror serves as a metaphor and a structural concept ...” (p.29). I hoped to use this mirroring image to elicit the image of multiple selves, from different stages on the journey of life. In this way, I hoped to provide the audience with a sense of emotional evolution. I think that the way we reflect on our past experiences is an important tool for emotional growth.

Third Section: The Competition

This section seeks to address human experiences of vulnerability and competitiveness. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, some people tend to hide their weaknesses in front of other people, and therefore compensate with false confidence.

They want to show people how strong they are, and they may feel competitive with others who they perceive as “more perfect” in some way.

In the beginning of this section, one female dancer walks on stage. She stares at the front without moving her feet until another female dancer arrives to stand in front of her. Then, the first dancer wants to be in front again, but instead of simply stepping around the second dancer, she starts to run in a full circle on stage until she returns to stand in the front. This minimalist movement repeats three times, and each time they take the longest possible route in order to find themselves back where they started. For me, this symbolizes the futility of the competitive aspect of dance. We may try and try to be the best, but our struggle to be better than others gets in the way of the actual work of self-growth. It is not until we can embrace our weaknesses, and ask for help, that we can learn new things. After we strive or struggle to admit our vulnerability, we may gain a new self-understanding and accept our imperfection. Then, we will appreciate our uniqueness. This section of the piece illustrates the endless journey that we take when we cannot be honest about our needs to each other, thereby denying our vulnerability.

In this section, there is a particular movement signature for one of the female dancers. She twitches her shoulder unpredictably, as she tries to accomplish other dance movement. It is like her body is betraying some internal conflict that she is trying to hide beneath her virtuosic movement. When I was working with this dancer in rehearsal, she told me about feeling anxiety when she is insecure. As we developed her solo in rehearsal, I asked her what she does when she feels anxious; she told me that she would clean. We experimented with different cleaning motions, which were often repetitive and laborious, like scrubbing or mopping. Eventually, we abstracted these motions into their

smallest version, like a small, repetitive tic. The obsession to clean, like a twitch in the scrubbing muscles, would come out in her movement when she least expected it.

Fernandes (2001) argues, “in many technique dance forms, repetition is used as a composition tool, to construct an abstract narrative conveying themes chosen by the choreographer” (p.35). Through my creative process, by utilizing repetition in section one through three of my piece, I have found that it helps me to underscore the desperate denial of vulnerability in the human condition. As the movement exposes the dancers’ individual voices, and then slowly begins to transform as the piece evolves, the individuals become part of a group. The repetition allows me to see the dancers’ personalities, but as the movement shows up different times and means different things, I begin to see the personality of the group. The repetitive movement, in its futility and its ability to transform, expresses layer after layer of vulnerability.

Another approach that I used, in order to shed light on multiple layers of meaning in the piece, was to alter the music that I used in the rehearsal process. As we developed the individual solos for each dancer, I would play different musical selections, in order to see whether other moods would draw some additional meaning from the movement. The movement would become more nuanced, as the remnants of all the different musical moods affected the dancers’ performance choices. Even though I eventually had to decide which music would help the choreography over all, the experiment of playing different music along with their solos was definitely one of my most successful composition tools. Through this experiment, I was able to see how much the dancers were willing to open themselves to change and discovery in their movement. It also opened up a chance for the dancers to discover how resilient they are in the face of constant challenges.

As I am in a transformative process here in the United States, culturally, personally and artistically, my earlier dance training and my previous artistic philosophy still exist in my mind. I remember in the earlier process rehearsing *La Vie*, I still wanted to create a lot of virtuosic dance movement for the piece. I was accustomed to believing that a dance piece should have technically virtuosic or challenging movement. Faculty stated that they could not see the connection between the virtuosic movement and the underlying theme of the piece. Therefore, I realized that although I was trying to break through my past choreographic experiences, it was more challenging than I had expected. I value this experience of self-reflection in my creative process. Because of this experience, I am able to see the process of my transformation, and I can better understand myself as an artist.

I am glad that through the creative process, the dancers became more comfortable talking to each other about aspects of their lives of which they had been ashamed or afraid. Through the intimate sharing of personal stories between choreographer and dancers, creating this piece was truly a journey of self-understanding, and helped me to recognize the value of vulnerability in art.

My Vulnerable Experience on Stage

[I]n order to work, in order to be excited, you have to be re-born on the instant and you have to permit yourself to feel. You have to permit yourself to be vulnerable... You must be touched by it, and your body must be alive.

Martha Graham

I entered onto the white marley floor, walking backward across the front of the stage. I stared at the blue dimmer light as I talked nonsense in English about American

fast food and Antarctica. My heartbeat was faster than usual. I could feel my feet were unstable as though I was standing on a wave. This was my first vulnerable moment on stage in the beginning of *Clear, White, Nonsense*, choreographed by my classmate Katherine Pottratz.

My role in the piece was to present my true self and the way I see this world, in particular my impression of American culture and Antarctica. I spoke in my non-native language, English. When I speak English it takes time for me to process and translate from Mandarin to English. Therefore, speaking out loud in English while dancing on stage in public makes me feel nervous and not confident. I was worried that the audience would not be able to understand my accent and the way I joke. I was anxious that the improvised section should not be improvised; maybe I should just memorize all of the text, so that I would be less nervous. My ego was injured by these moments in the piece, because I did not want people to see my weaknesses and I did not want to be vulnerable on stage, exposing my moment of struggle or clumsiness with English.

In *Psychology of Dance*, Taylor and Taylor (1995) mention that self-confidence influences a dancer's performance on stage. Reflecting on my insecurities as a performer in *Clear, White, Nonsense*, I believe they were because I am not confident speaking English on stage. Taylor and Taylor (1995) also claim "self-confidence in dance can be defined as how strongly dancers believe they can learn and execute a skill or perform a certain role" (p.38). When a dancer obtains great physicality in dance, but does not believe he or she can perform well on stage, they won't be able to perform fully. On the contrary, dancers with high self-confidence tend to be relaxed during performance, so they might perform with solid maturity, executing the movement well. It is true that as a

performer, I cared a lot about the reaction from the audience, especially as I spoke improvisationally in English. The more I cared about audience reaction, the more pressure I applied on myself. Taylor and Taylor (1995) also suggest that, “dancers often have difficulty trying to develop their self-confidence because during a rehearsal or performance they become so focused on the pressures of the performing that they simply forget to work on their positive thinking” (p.45). The more I performed this piece, the more I felt comfortable and willing to be vulnerable. I recognized my fear speaking English, but I chose to share my imperfect language with the audience anyway.

Through the rehearsal process and after a few performances of this piece, I came to realize that allowing myself to be vulnerable is crucial to enhance my performing confidence and skill. Since then, I began to focus on my actual role in the piece. I remember when I prepared myself to get on stage. I started to imagine myself living in Antarctica and enjoying American fast food. As long as I had these images in my mind, it helped me relax and more easily open and share my impressions as I improvised on stage. Thus, my anxiousness, nervousness and worries were all gone and I was truly showing my vulnerability on stage.

In the rehearsal process, the pressure to produce brilliant text made me very frustrated. I know that Pottratz often wondered whether the piece would be a “flop,” because the text was such an important element in the piece. I was intimidated and sometimes my brain just stopped. As we began the run of the show there were a lot of unknowns. However, on stage, the magic would arrive. Through our trust in the unpredictable, we were able to create a tender and flirtatious connection to the audience.

Deborah Hay claims: “Trust yourself. Use the images as far out and as far in as you will go. Trust yourself...to feel everything there is” (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, p.46). Although speaking imperfect English and exposing my grammatical mistakes were my vulnerable experiences in the piece, the result ultimately turned out to be a priceless journey of learning. It was challenging, but rewarding.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.

Brené Brown

Artists are constantly finding new ways to create connections between their worlds and those of their audience. Vulnerability can be found in many art forms, not only dance. I believe that this type of choreography can help us to understand ourselves. I hope that by looking at my own vulnerability, as well as that of my dancers, we can use our weaknesses to become our strengths in performance.

Through my thesis research, I have discovered that I may feel or see vulnerabilities everywhere in my life. However, no matter how our vulnerable experiences may embarrass or shame us, I believe the crucial thing is how we accept or embrace those vulnerabilities. Through my vulnerabilities, I have found myself as a performer and a choreographer in profound ways. Dance for me is no longer a mechanical task or a purely virtuosic mission to fulfill. Dance is an infinite journey of exploration; it allows me to connect with others and to be vulnerable to embrace the unknown world. During my MFA studies, I have grown like a sponge absorbing water. I

came to a different country, learned an unfamiliar language and entered a new cultural community. I had to allow myself to be vulnerable, to ask for help, to relearn things that I had known before. Then I was able to see and learn things from a new perspective; I had to challenge myself through these vulnerabilities no matter how shameful or embarrassed I felt. Sometimes I failed, but I had to stand up and try again. There were some moments that frustrated me, but I knew there was no way for me to give up, because I started to learn how to embrace my struggle instead of escape from it.

Stein (2010) once mentioned in *Movement as a Vehicle to and from the Unconscious*, “Accessing the wisdom of the body lies in the ability to listen and to let ourselves be moved by something greater than ourselves. We no longer move our ego, but we are moved by that which moves us” (p.153). I have learned how to contribute some of myself to the dance community because I have begun the process of learning to create work that moves me. I have also learned to value the essence of dance movement and its intentions.

Dance is not only moving the body, dance is an art form; it is a medium to help us understand who we are as human beings. As humans, we render ourselves completely vulnerable, experience an intense vulnerability in exposing our true emotions through our bodies, so that it is nearly impossible to separate the art from the artist. In *Art and Fear*, Bayles and Orland (1993) ask us to “consider that if artist equals self, then when (inevitably) you make flawed art, you are a flawed person” (p.7). Through this research, my belief in being performers is that we have to first be moved ourselves and then allow ourselves to be vulnerable in performance. We must understand that we are all flawed as humans, and it is these weaknesses that connect us, not isolate us. As a choreographer, I

will constantly explore human commonalities to make art that is more vivid and connected with others. Perhaps, one of the most universal languages in art is the communication of vulnerability, because it provides us with a window into the minds and hearts of other flawed human beings.

When I am an educator in dance, I will encourage students not to be afraid to place themselves in a vulnerable position, because this is when we grow. In *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (1998) says, “we teach who we are” (p.1). This proverb has already inserted itself in my mind and in my future. I will always encourage my students to embrace vulnerability in art and in life. Also, I will never forget to encourage myself to do the same thing.

Through the past 3 years, I have come to the conclusion that there is no absolute measure for success in this world. It is about how honestly we address our challenges and face our weaknesses. Even though I may still be concerned with someone’s opinion of me in the future, during these 3 years in the United States and in the MFA program, I now feel more comfortable revealing my true self and my vulnerability in front of my friends and my community. I even love myself more than I did before starting this program. When I take my training out into the world, whether I land in Europe or Taiwan, I will use this research to help others to become more comfortable. I will encourage students and dancers to find their personal voices, to be confident in their self-expression, and above all, to be courageous in their art. We can all turn our imperfections into strengths because we are human and flawed. It is the flaws that bring us together, in empathy with vulnerability as our bond.

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